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FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS)

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER ABDALLAH LAYS IT ON THICK

REF: A. TUNIS 2688

- [1](#)B. TUNIS 2586
- [1](#)C. TUNIS 2501
- [1](#)D. TUNIS 2408
- [1](#)E. TUNIS 2639

CLASSIFIED BY: CDA DAVID BALLARD FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: FOREIGN MINISTER ABDALLAH ON NOVEMBER 6 CONVOKED CHARGE, "FOR NO PARTICULAR REASON." IN REALITY, THE GOAL OF THE MEETING WAS QUITE CLEAR: ABDALLAH SOUGHT TO EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE U.S.-TUNISIAN BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP, WHICH HE ENTHUSIASTICALLY CHARACTERIZED AS "TRULY AN ALLIANCE!" FOLLOWING A RECENT TELCON WITH NEA A/S WELCH, IN WHICH THE LATTER EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT GOT INTERFERENCE IN EMBASSY ACTIVITIES (REFS A AND C), ABDALLAH SOUGHT TO PORTRAY EMBASSY CONCERNS AS AN EXAGGERATED RESPONSE TO "CUSTOMARY" DIPLOMATIC DEMANDS, SUCH AS PRIOR APPROVAL/KNOWLEDGE OF EMBASSY MEETINGS WITH NGOS. THERE WAS NO SIGN OF AN APPRECIATION FOR THE LARGER DIPLOMATIC PRINCIPLES AT STAKE. END SUMMARY.

IN PRAISE OF THE BILATERAL "ALLIANCE"

[1](#)2. (C) FOREIGN MINISTER ABDALLAH OPENED HIS HOUR-LONG MEETING WITH CHARGE AND POLECONCOUNS BY MAKING REFERENCE TO HIS PASSION FOR AMERICAN CINEMA, A SUBJECT TO WHICH THE TWO RETURNED TOWARD THE END OF THE MEETING, WHEN IT WAS BROUGHT TO ABDALLAH'S ATTENTION THAT, IN PASSING UP AN INVITATION TO VISIT THE USS ENTERPRISE ON NOVEMBER 4, HE HAD MISSED THE OPPORTUNITY TO SEE THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER FEATURED IN THE BLOCKBUSTER "TOP GUN" AND EXPERIENCE A TAILHOOK LANDING AND CATAPULT-STYLE TAKEOFF. (HE WAS DEVASTATED BUT SAID HE COULD NOT GET AWAY.) ABDALLAH NOTED THAT HE HAD "NO PARTICULAR REASON" FOR CONVOKING CHARGE; HE SAID HE HAD BEEN MEANING TO MEET GET TOGETHER EVER SINCE HIS MID-OCTOBER TELCON WITH A/S DAVID WELCH, DURING WHICH THE LATTER EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE GOT'S FORCIBLE PREVENTION OF EMBOFFS' MEETING WITH THE BIZERTE BRANCH OF THE TUNISIAN HUMAN RIGHTS LEAGUE (LTDH) (REF C). "I WANT TO KNOW HOW YOUR WORK IS GOING," ABDALLAH SAID. HE EMPHASIZED HIS CONVICTION THAT, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STRONG BILATERAL RELATIONS THAT TUNISIA AND THE UNITED STATES ENJOY -- "TRULY, AN ALLIANCE!" -- IT WOULD BE A MISTAKE TO ALLOW "THE LITTLE THINGS" TO BE BLOWN UP INTO LARGER PROBLEMS. LIKENING THE U.S.-TUNISIAN BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP TO THE BOND BETWEEN A MARRIED COUPLE, ABDALLAH OPINED THAT MINOR IRRITANTS CONSTITUTE A NORMAL PART OF ANY RELATIONSHIP. THE IMPORTANT THING, HE SAID, IS THAT "WE TALK TO ONE ANOTHER ABOUT THEM."

[1](#)3. (C) ILLUSTRATING THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE RELATIONSHIP FROM HIS VANTAGE POINT, ABDALLAH PROUDLY RECALLED HIS 2005

MEETING WITH SECRETARY RICE, DURING WHICH HE SAID THE SECRETARY HAD INSISTED THAT HE FEEL FREE TO CALL HER

SIPDIS

"ANYTIME." ABDALLAH ALSO REFERENCED THE 2005 VISIT TO TUNISIA BY SECDEF RUMSFELD, IN ADDITION TO RECENT CONVERSATIONS WITH UNDER SECRETARY BURNS AND ASSISTANT SECRETARY WELCH, WHICH HE CHARACTERIZED AS "WARM AND

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AMICABLE." ABDALLAH SAID THAT HE HOPED RELATIONS WITH THE U.S. EMBASSY IN TUNISIA COULD BE EQUALLY AS POSITIVE. REFERRING TO THE MYRIAD DEMARCHES EMBOFFS DELIVER ON THE FULL RANGE OF DIPLOMATIC ISSUES, ABDALLAH SAID THAT THE GOT GREATLY APPRECIATES U.S. COUNSEL ON SUCH MATTERS. BEYOND THAT, HE CONTINUED, TUNISIA COUNTS ON THE UNITED STATES FOR ITS "GLOBAL STRATEGY," INCLUDING ITS DEFENSE, ITS ECONOMY, AND ITS PLACE IN THE WORLD. "THE UNITED STATES IS INDISPENSABLE!" HE EXCLAIMED. ABDALLAH ALSO POINTED OUT THAT TUNISIA CONTINUES TO PLAY A MODERATING ROLE IN THE REGION AND "ALWAYS" SUPPORTS U.S. POSITIONS IN INTERNATIONAL FORA.

HIGH-LEVEL COMINGS AND GOINGS

¶4. (SBU) ON THE SUBJECT OF THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP, ABDALLAH NOTED THAT MFA DG FOR THE AMERICAS GHAZI JOMAA HAD JUST DEPARTED FOR HIS ONWARD ASSIGNMENT AS AMBASSADOR TO TURKEY. ABDALLAH VOLUNTEERED THAT HE HAD NOT YET CHOSEN JOMAA'S SUCCESSOR; HE IS STILL REFLECTING ON THE QUESTION. HE MADE CLEAR THAT HE VIEWS THE APPOINTMENT AS HIGHLY IMPORTANT, AND THAT HE WOULD BE LOOKING FOR A CANDIDATE AT THE AMBASSADORIAL LEVEL WHO UNDERSTANDS THE DOSSIER AND HAS THE RELEVANT EXPERIENCE. CHARGE INTERJECTED SUGGESTING THAT "ACCESSIBILITY" ALSO BE INCLUDED ON THE LIST OF REQUIRED VIRTUES, A SUGGESTION TO WHICH ABDALLAH READILY AGREED. ABDALLAH INTIMATED THAT THE CURRENT POOL OF RETURNING AMBASSADORS LEFT SOMETHING TO BE DESIRED, HOWEVER, AND THAT IT WOULD BE HARD TO FIND A GOOD FIT.

¶5. (SBU) TURNING TO THE IMMINENT ARRIVAL OF AMBASSADOR GODEC, ABDALLAH SAID THAT HE WOULD WORK TO ALLOW THE NEW AMBASSADOR TO PRESENT HIS CREDENTIALS IN A TIMELY MANNER. HE INDICATED THAT HE HAD "HEARD A LOT OF GOOD THINGS ABOUT" AMBASSADOR GODEC.

THE LTDH IS A "SPECIAL CASE"

¶6. (C) REGARDING THE GOT'S BLOCKING OF EMBOFFS' ATTEMPTS TO MEET WITH MEMBERS OF THE LTDH IN BIZERTE (REFS A AND C), ABDALLAH MADE TWO CONTRADICTORY POINTS: FIRST, HE SAID, "THE ONLY CONDITION WE HAVE IS THAT THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS BE INFORMED" AHEAD OF TIME OF ANY EMBASSY MEETINGS WITH SUCH GROUPS, A POINT WITH WHICH THE CHARGE TOOK ISSUE, NOTING THAT TUNISIAN EMBASSY OFFICERS IN WASHINGTON DO NOT HAVE TO INFORM THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF THEIR MEETINGS WITH AMERICAN NGOS. (NOTE: PLEADING IGNORANCE AS A NON-CAREER DIPLOMAT, ABDALLAH SAID THAT HE HAD GOTTEN THIS INFORMATION FROM THE TUNISIAN AMBASSADOR IN WASHINGTON, WHO TOLD HIM THAT SUCH REQUIREMENTS WERE "CUSTOMARY." END NOTE.) ABDALLAH THEN SAID THAT HE HAD ASKED HIS STAFF TO PROVIDE THE U.S. EMBASSY WITH A TRANSLATION OF A JUDICIAL DECISION THAT PROHIBITS ALL CONTACT WITH THE LTDH. (NOTE: HE WAS PRESUMABLY REFERRING TO THE 2001 DECISION REFERRED TO IN REF ¶A. END NOTE.) DESCRIBING THE LTDH AS A "SPECIAL CASE," ABDALLAH WENT ON TO BEMOAN THE INTERNAL SCHISMS IN THE LTDH THAT HAVE HAMSTRUNG THE ORGANIZATION FOR YEARS.

A BIGGER PRINCIPLE AT STAKE

¶7. (C) CHARGE POINTED OUT THAT THE UNITED STATES HAD NOT TAKEN SIDES IN THE LTDH DISPUTE; RATHER, EMBOFFS SOUGHT MEETINGS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION. INDEED, HE

SAID, EMBOFFS HAD MET WITH MEMBERS OF THE PRO-GOVERNMENT FACTION OF THE ORGANIZATION. RATHER THAN GETTING ENMESHED IN THE DIFFERENT LEGAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE 2001 DECISION, CHARGE MADE CLEAR THAT THE ISSUE WENT BEYOND THE LTDH; U.S. EMBASSY PERSONNEL SHOULD BE FREE TO ENGAGE ANY NGO WITHOUT GOT APPROVAL. IN THIS CONTEXT, HE CONTINUED, HE HAD BEEN EXTREMELY TROUBLED BY THE SIMULTANEOUS PUBLICATION IN THREE TUNISIAN NEWSPAPERS OF COLUMNS DENIGRATING CIVIL SOCIETY REPRESENTATIVES WHO DEAL WITH SUPERPOWER EMBASSIES AS TRAITORS (REF D). THIS WAS NO COINCIDENCE, CHARGE SAID; IT COULD ONLY BE SEEN AS A DELIBERATE CAMPAIGN OF INTIMIDATION TO PREVENT TUNISIANS FROM MEETING EMBASSY REPRESENTATIVES. ABDALLAH ACQUIESCED THAT THE PUBLICATION OF THE COLUMNS WAS NOT A COINCIDENCE AND HE DID NOT DISPUTE THAT THE EMBASSY TUNISIANS WERE BEING WARNED AWAY FROM WAS THE U.S. EMBASSY. HE ASSERTED THAT THE PROXIMATE CAUSE OF THEIR PUBLICATION WAS NOT A HUMAN RIGHTS ROUNDTABLE AT THE U.S. EMBASSY, HOWEVER. (NOTE: AS HAD BEEN INDICATED IN A PREVIOUS MFA NONPAPER. END NOTE.) INSTEAD, HE SUGGESTED THAT "SOME OTHER SEMINAR" HAD "PROVOKED" THE COLUMNS. CHARGE SAID HE AGREED THAT THE UNITED STATES AND TUNISIA ENJOY EXCELLENT RELATIONS AND GOOD COMMUNICATIONS ON IMPORTANT MULTILATERAL ISSUES, BUT THAT WE ALSO NEEDED FREEDOM TO WORK ON BILATERAL ISSUES ON THE GROUND IN TUNISIA. LIKE HIM, THE EMBASSY WANTED GOOD RELATIONS -- BUT WITH THE WHOLE GOT, NOT JUST THE MFA.

PAN-ARAB TV TO BLAME --
OR THE VIRULENTLY ANTI-U.S. ASH-SHOUROUQ?

18. (C) SHIFTING THE SUBJECT, ABDALLAH EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE INCREASING INFLUENCE IN TUNISIA OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM, A PHENOMENON THAT HE BLAMED ON THE IRRESPONSIBLE PROGRAMMING OF PAN-ARAB SATELLITE TV CHANNELS. CHARGE RESPONDED THAT HE FOUND THE COVERAGE OF ASH-SHOUROUQ, THE TUNISIAN ARABIC DAILY WITH THE WIDEST CIRCULATION, TO BE JUST AS TROUBLING AS THAT OF THE SATELLITE TV CHANNELS, SINCE IT WAS SPREADING EXACTLY THE SAME KIND OF HATRED ABDALLAH HAD HIMSELF ASCRIBED TO AL-JAZEERA IN AN OFFICIAL STATEMENT THE WEEK BEFORE, WHEN HE WAS DISCUSSING THE CLOSURE OF TUNISIA'S EMBASSY IN QATAR (REF E). ABDALLAH CONCEDED CHARGE'S POINT THAT ASH-SHOUROUQ HAS BEEN "FAWNING" IN ITS COVERAGE OF SADDAM HUSSEIN, AND THAT THE COMBINATION OF ITS PRO-HIZBALLAH, PRO-ZARQAWI, AND PRO-NASRALLAH COVERAGE COMBINED TO PRODUCE VIRULENTLY ANTI-U.S. SCREEDS. HE INDICATED THAT HE HAD COMPLAINED TO HIS COUNTERPART WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MEDIA RELATIONS.

COMMENT

19. (C) DESPITE ABDALLAH'S PROTESTATIONS THAT HE HAD NO PARTICULAR REASON FOR CALLING THIS MEETING, HIS AGENDA WAS CLEAR: HE WANTED TO REFOCUS THE EMBASSY'S ATTENTION ON THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP, I.E., U.S.-TUNISIAN COOPERATION ON INTERNATIONAL ISSUES, AND AWAY FROM THORNY DOMESTIC POLITICAL ISSUES THE GOT WOULD MUCH RATHER WE IGNORE. THE POSITIVE TONE OF THE MEETING WAS REFRESHING; WE ONLY WISH ABDALLAH WOULD CHANNEL SOME OF THE ENTHUSIASM WE NOW KNOW HE HARBORS FOR AMERICAN MOVIES LIKE "TOP GUN" TOWARD A TRULY PRODUCTIVE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP THAT WOULD ALLOW EMBOFFS TO OPERATE FREELY IN TUNISIA. BY EMPHASIZING HIS "WARM AND FRIENDLY" EXCHANGES WITH WASHINGTON-BASED COUNTERPARTS, ABDALLAH ALSO POINTEDLY SOUGHT TO PORTRAY POST CONCERNS OVER GOT INTERFERENCE IN OUR ACTIVITIES AS EXAGGERATED AT BEST, IF NOT WHINY AND MISGUIDED. THE UNSTATED IMPLICATION WAS THE AGE-OLD TUNISIAN DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBASSY AS THE THORN IN THE SIDE OF OTHERWISE RAPTUROUS BILATERAL RELATIONS. (NOTE: WE HAVE HEARD THIS FOR SO LONG, ONE BEGINS TO WONDER IF THE GOT NOTICES THAT AMBASSADORS AND THEIR STAFFS COME AND GO, AND IT'S ALWAYS SOMEHOW THE "EMBASSY" THAT GETS THE PICTURE WRONG. END NOTE.)

110. (C) COMMENT, CONT'D. ABDALLAH IS ALWAYS CHARISMATIC AND CHARMING IN MEETINGS, DISPLAYING AN EASY CONFIDENCE THROUGH WHICH HE SEEKS TO GIVE HIS INTERLOCUTORS THE IMPRESSION THAT HE IS REALLY "CONSULTING" WITH THEM. UPON CLOSER

EXAMINATION, HOWEVER, WHAT HE SAYS RARELY OR BARELY DEPARTS FROM STANDARD GOT TALKING POINTS -- POINTS ABOUT THE GOT'S SELF-PROJECTED IMAGE OF TUNISIA AS A MODERN, MODERATE, RESPONSIBLE PARTNER. THEY ALSO HAPPEN TO BE POINTS THAT ABDALLAH HIMSELF LARGELY CRAFTED DURING HIS YEARS AS THE PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR ENTRUSTED WITH KEEPING THE DOMESTIC MEDIA STIFLED AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA AND NGO CRITICISM OF TUNISIA VIGOROUSLY CHALLENGED AND PUBLICLY REJECTED.

BALLARD